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Airlift director called freedom freelancer

By Glenn Garvin
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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — The CIA veteran who supervised the secret airlift supplying Nicaraguan rebels on which Eugene Hasenfus was captured was "a freelancer for democracy" who also devised a plan for bringing wounded rebels to Miami 18 months ago, a resistance leader said here.

Adolfo Calero said the CIA veteran — known variously as Max Gomez or Felix Rodriguez — was "very helpful to us ... but I haven't seen him in months."

Mr. Gomez has achieved notoriety over the past three weeks, since the Nicaraguan army shot down a C-123 cargo plane carrying arms and supplies to anti-government rebels.

The only survivor of the flight, Mr. Hasenfus, publicly identified Mr. Gomez as one of "two Cuban nationalized Americans that worked for the CIA" who supervised the supply operation.

He said the other was named Ramon Medina. Mr. Calero said he has never heard of Ramon Medina.

But he did know Mr. Gomez, who apparently is a longtime veteran of clandestine activities. Several published reports have said Mr. Gomez is a one-time CIA

agent who also goes by the name Felix Rodriguez. He is said to be an acquaintance of Vice President George Bush.

Mr. Gomez's current whereabouts are not known. The apartment he once occupied in San Salvador has been vacant since the supply plane was shot down. Mr. Bush has said he believed Mr. Gomez has been employed lately as a consultant to the Salvadoran Air Force. Salvadoran officials deny that, but CBS News recently discovered tapes showing Mr. Gomez standing among several Salvadoran Air Force officers at an awards ceremony.

Mr. Calero said he met Mr. Gomez about two years ago, through a mutual friend named Jose Basulto who, like Mr. Gomez, is a Cuban-American veteran of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Mr. Calero smiled slightly as he recalled being told Mr. Gomez was "a retired U.S. civil servant."

"I don't know exactly where he worked [at the time they were introduced]," said Mr. Calero. "He said to me he was 'a freelancer for democracy.'"

About six months later, Mr. Calero said, Mr. Gomez came to him with a plan for getting seriously wounded rebel soldiers out of Nicaragua and into a Miami hospital.

"Then he vanished," Mr. Calero said. "I didn't see him again until I ran into him in a Miami hotel on a social occasion a few months ago."

Mr. Calero said it was never clear to him who financed Mr. Gomez's activities.

Mr. Gomez "is quite a character," Mr. Calero said. "He's one of these active, down-to-earth individuals who gives himself to the cause of freedom. He wasn't working for anybody in particular, he was just doing things for democracy."

Mr. Calero said that although his knowledge of the supply operation was incomplete, he is certain it was not a CIA operation, as Mr. Hasenfus has alleged from his prison cell in Managua.

"Whatever Hasenfus has said, under duress, without counsel, in prison under terrible mental or psychological pressure, doesn't mean anything to me," Mr. Calero said. "Anything he has said could not be used to try him by any judge or jury that has any appreciation for the law, any respect for the law."

Mr. Calero said the supply operation was a private one. Most of the arrangements for the operation were made by William Cooper, an American veteran of several CIA-related companies, who died in the crash, he said.

"I never met Hasenfus, or Cooper ...

they were not part of UNO," or the United Nicaraguan Opposition, Mr. Calero's rebel group, he said. "They were not part of the organization, they were not contracted by the organization. We cooperated with them. That is a fact."

"There was coordination. We were ready to accept what they [Mr. Cooper's group] offered us. But they didn't tell us where the money came from, and we didn't ask."

The Sandinista government of Nicaragua says documents recovered from the wreckage of the C-123 indicate in recent months it made flights to several military installations, including one to Mercury, Nev., used for testing of classified aircraft like the new Stealth bomber.

"I don't know where the plane has been," Mr. Calero said. "A plane is not a person. It will do one thing sometimes, then another thing other times. If we captured a plane from the Sandinistas, it would be used against them — even though in the past it had been used for them. One set of activities for a plane doesn't have anything to do with another set."

Mr. Calero said the loss of the C-123 disrupted rebel supply activities temporarily, but he added that supply flights resumed last week.